

“Forgiveness” a sermon based on Matthew 18:21-35 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 13 September 2020 by Kerry Enright.

A seven year old boy was riding between his two older brothers in the back seat of the family car. Suddenly, their mother, drained and distraught from the experience of her husband’s abandonment, reached over the front seat and slammed the seven year old across the face with her hand. “You! The only reason I had you,” she screamed, “was to keep your father. I never wanted you! I hate you!

The scene was indelibly engraved in the child’s memory. Over the years, the mother reinforced the sincerity of those remarks by praising the older sons and by unnecessarily and continually finding fault and blame with the youngest one. The youngest faithfully sought the mother’s approval and blessing, but it never came.

Years later, the depth of his resentment, hurt and anger became clearer. For years, it was he who remained devoted to his mother, cared for her, did the many chores around the house willingly and lovingly only to be rejected at every turn. He wondered if he could ever forgive her. He knew he wanted to try because the resentment and hurt he felt gnawed at him relentlessly and he found himself emotionally imprisoned.

Doris Donnelly was a teacher and counsellor. She saw the son many months after he made the decision to forgive. “I can’t tell you how many times in the last twenty three years I have relived the scene as a boy in the car”, he said. “Thousands, probably. But recently, while I was reliving it, I put myself in my mother’s place for a change. Here she was, a high school graduate with no money, no job and a family of four to support. I realised how powerless, lonely, hurt and depressed she must have felt. I thought of the anger, fear, the pain that must have been there. And I thought of how much I must have reminded her of the failure of all her young hopes. It was the beginning of my forgiveness of her.

“I debated,” he continued, “whether to tell her any of this. I prayed. My forgiveness deepened and so did my desire to talk with her about this and I finally did. I was not sure I could find the right words, and above all, I did

not want her to feel guilty. I told her that I understood and I loved her. We wept in each other's arms for what seemed like hours. It was the beginning of a new life for me. For us.¹"

Forgiveness is not easy. It takes time. It needs empathy.

The slave had been forgiven a ridiculously large amount, 10,000 talents. A talent was the largest denomination of money in the ancient world. 10,000 talents was fifteen year's salary 10,000 times over. 100 million days wages for the average worker. So this was an absurd debt. Never repayable. Incalculable. Which is surely part of Jesus' answer to Peter's question. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

One of the online commentators on this passage said to one of his colleagues, humorously - "Well, Caroline, on my phone I have a sinned against me app that calculates how many times I have been sinned against, and it tells me that you have sinned against me 75 times, and there is only two more before I need to stop forgiving you." Life is not for counting the times people sin against us or hurt us or harm us. It is not for counting how much I need to forgive. Forgiveness and the need for forgiveness cannot be calculated. We do not live transactionally as if when we do something, the other person must respond. We do not determine how God acts or how others must act. So God snaps what shackles us to the past. We are freed from victimhood.

Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber speaks about the power of forgiveness to free us for justice.

"Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'?"

¹ From Doris Donnelly *Putting Forgiveness Into Practice* 1982 Argus Publications Allen Texas

Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for.²

That kind of forgiveness doesn't just happen. It needs the encouragement of a forgiving community.

Before coming here, I was involved with an agency that had a programme called Young Ambassadors for Peace. It operated in many parts of the world, including in the Solomon Islands after the Malaita conflict, among fighting clans in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, and with Muslims and Christians in Ambon, Indonesia.

In 1999, that area was decimated by violence. At least 5,000 people killed and 700 thousand people displaced. Temples and churches destroyed in a cycle of retribution. Young Ambassadors for Peace brought young Muslim and Christian people together. I attended one of their week long courses. Part involved burning prejudices in a big urn. At the end of the week, we sat in a circle and when we felt able to commit to peace, we each lit a candle and placed it in front of us. It was nearly at the end when a young Muslim man, just could not do it. Angrily, he swiped the lit candles around him and refused to participate. Instantly, the young Muslim people around him rushed to him and hugged him. For a long time, they held him in love. They spoke words of deep affection. Tears flowed. And he returned to the circle. We started the process again. And with his friends sitting beside him, he lit his candle. The practice of forgiveness needs nourishing by a community that practices it, that holds us in love, especially when the wounds are deep.

This meal is a reminder of God's incalculable love, a love that draws people together in forgiveness. It is not easy. It takes time. And it sets us free. God, may you live it in us and among us, we pray. Amen.

² Quoted in Journey with Jesus <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2748>

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